Navy Medicine at D-Day: Stories of Valor and Sacrifice

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On the morning of June 6, 1944, Navy physician Lt. (j.g.) Frank Ramsey, Jr., and Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Byron Dary landed on Omaha Beach with the 6th Naval Beach Battalion.

Upon hitting the beachhead, the physician and hospital corpsman rushed to the aid of wounded Army personnel lying near a burning half-track. In minutes, the vehicle exploded spraying shrapnel across the battlefield and taking Ramsey out of the fight. With little protection against this onslaught, Dary dragged Ramsey to a foxhole and administered first aid. He then ran through machinegun and shellfire to aide a severely wounded Army colonel, all while being targeted by an enemy sniper.

Lt (j.g.) Frank Hall, of the 7th Naval Beach Battalion, was part of the initial assault on Omaha Beach when his landing craft was sunk three miles from the beachhead. Salvaging what medical supplies he could, Hall then swam through the cold ocean water to the distant shore. Despite extreme exhaustion and facing relentless enemy fire, Hall "resolutely" assumed command of the "medical work," leading the triage and attending to numerous casualties until they could be evacuated.

The dedication and devotion of these Navy medical providers stand out, but they were far from alone at the Battle for Normandy. From D-Day of June 6th, 1944 to the end of the battle on August 30, 1944, Navy Medicine played an unsung but vital role in what Gen. Dwight Eisenhower termed the "Great Crusade." Our physicians, hospital corpsmen, dentists, pharmacists could be found on ship and shore—serving aboard landing craft bringing the Army V Corps to the fight; aboard battleships, cruisers, and destroyers that pounded German fortifications and cleared the way into the beaches; and embedded with the 2nd, 6th and 7th Naval Beach Battalions on the fabled Omaha and Utah Beaches.

Frank Snyder, a hospital corpsman with the 6th Beach Battalion later remembered that the Navy's mission was simple: "Treat the casualties and get them wherever we could find safe cover for them."

This was not always an easy task under the extreme conditions of an active battlefield. These highly trained medical personnel were frontline medical support attending to an assortment of penetrating wounds to the head, face, neck, and extremities, and fractures, burns and blast injuries and serving as the crucial link to evacuation ships offshore–all under the barrage of high velocity small arms, and artillery fire. Armed with litters and unit medical kits, hospital corpsmen of the beach battalions administered first aid—battle dressing, tourniquets, morphine injections, applying casualty tags—and then moved the wounded down to the water's edge so they could be evacuated aboard landing craft heading back out to the transports. When that was not feasible, they sought shelter and set up aid stations above the high tide line.

"Sometimes we'd have four or five [casualties] stacked up along the sand there waiting for a landing craft that would come in and would take them," remembered Snyder. "By the afternoon of D plus 1 we weren't having too much of a problem anymore. The artillery fire was not being directed at them. It was being directed at the larger vessels."

“The biggest problem we had was a lot of casualties on the beach and trying to get them out of the way to keep track vehicles, and bulldozers, and tanks and trucks from running over the bodies that were laying up on the high-water mark,” recalled Dr. Lee Parker, a physician with the 6th Naval Beach Battalion.

Once the battalions loaded the wounded aboard landing craft, they were transferred to specially equipped LSTs (landing ship, tanks) and APAs (attack transports) staffed by physicians and hospital corpsmen. Each LST had special brackets to accommodate up to 147 litters arranged in tiers three high on their tank decks. Here the casualties received emergency treatment after these ships unloaded their tanks and troops.

At Normandy, as in the Pacific Theater, LSTs were used heavily by Navy Medicine. Navy-led surgical teams could be found on some 16 LSTs specially designated as “emergency hospitals” off the coast of Normandy. Navy medical personnel could also be found aboard the 103 LSTs as ship’s crew, helping to stabilize and evacuate over 41,000 casualties from Normandy’s beaches to facilities in England.

Seventeen days after the initial landings at Normandy, the casualty evacuation system was working so smoothly that the naval beach battalions returned to England. Navy medical personnel would continue serving offshore in supporting role until August 1944.

In the end, Normandy was a successful military operation that came with great cost of life. It is estimated that over 29,000 U.S. service personnel were killed at Normandy. These numbers also included four Navy physicians, one dentist and 23 hospital corpsmen attached to LSTs, support ships and the beach battalions.

Navy Medical personnel at Normandy were awarded two Navy Crosses (including Dr. Frank Hall), five Silver Stars (including Pharmacist’s Mate Third Class Byron Dary), 12 Legions of Merit (two physicians and 12 corpsmen) and 23 Bronze Stars (16 physicians and seven corpsmen).

In 2012, Frank Ramsey, the physician severely injured by flying debris on Omaha Beach, was awarded the Bronze Star in a ceremony aboard USS New Jersey. He was 96 years old at the time and would go on to live to the age of 103.

Throughout the operation, Navy Medicine did what it always has and always will—provide frontline medical care and support to our warfighters during the most trying moments. And few moments in our history were ever as big as Normandy.

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